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Developing students' intercultural and collocational competence through analysing the business press. A corpus-based pedagogic experiment among Romanian MA students.

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Abstract

EFL students, especially those who have reached an upper-intermediate to advanced level, have the tendency of learning a foreign language as a system per se, often without paying heed to the intercultural and socio-linguistic issues that may arise when comparing the mother tongue with the target language, or when trying to find the right equivalent between the two systems. This study aims at identifying the ways in which students may infer intercultural connections between the mother tongue and the English language, in terms of business collocations occurring in business press. An experiment was conducted in which 19 MA students in Language and Communication for Business Administration were assigned the task of collecting mini corpora of business press texts in both English and Romanian, they had to identify and analyze business collocations and their analysis revealed their varying ability to gain deeper insights into the similarities and differences arising from both languages' collocational patterning, assignable to cultural peculiarities.

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1. Introduction

An experiment was designed during the Corpus Linguistics course in which 19 MA students in Language and Communication in Business Administration turned into corpus compilers and corpus analysts and were assigned the task of creating corpora of business press texts in both English and Romanian (approximately 15.000 words in each language for each student). A number of 10 headwords (the same in both languages) were selected for each student from different business press sub-genres: *business, market, finance, real estate, banking*, etc. Electronic online (monolingual) dictionaries were also used to clarify meaning when necessary.

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2. Research methodology

Students were introduced to the main concepts in linguistic analysis and were explained the definition of linguistic analysis (as scientific method of researching overall or detailed language phenomena, of studying and classifying them) and the importance of *analysis* in linguistic research (Matei & Sporiş, 2010, 44).

2.1. Methods

Students' analysis followed the routine procedure as in any case of corpus-based analysis under the strict guidance and supervision of the teacher: selecting and collecting the relevant texts to be introduced in the corpus, compiling mini-corpora starting from the already assigned headwords, identifying and extracting them from different newspaper articles, conducting analysis on the business collocations identified in their parallel corpora, comparing the findings. Students were given specific instructions regarding the population of texts to be included, they were also explained how to interpret data. Before compiling the articles, students had to go through the stage of processing the article, cleaning the ads and photos. The software used by students (Concapp) was selected due to its user-friendliness and it helped the students conduct simple searches for headwords and calculate their occurrences. The selection of students who became subject to this experiment took into account their background in business English as well as in linguistics; students were previously trained to tackle linguistic problems and were equipped with competences in linguistic analysis acquired during MA previous courses in linguistics. The selection of headwords was in accordance with the criterion of frequency in both English and Romanian business written press. Students were provided with a list of newspapers on economics and they had to make their own selection of newspaper articles to be incorporated in close relation with the purpose of the analysis to be undertaken and with the structure of the corpora. Since the structure was related with economic and financial terms, no diversity was involved in selecting the articles. As students' corpora were meant to be the basis for undertaking an inventory and an analysis of business collocations, no such items as representativeness, size and balance, usually helpful in quantifying corpora, were taken into account. After the lexicographic and linguistic processing of the texts, the final results of the corpus study were subject to quantitative analysis, and to contrastive analysis –in order to see how business collocations retrieved from the newspaper articles occur and are treated in Romanian and English business texts.

2.2. Hypothesis

We started this experiment from the assumption that linguistic research ranging from historical linguistics to lexicography and further on to translation theory, foreign language teaching and language acquisition heavily relies nowadays on the use of corpora, in fact almost every field of linguistics can be tackled from a corpus perspective. Corpus-based approach and the subject of the paper are in line with the authors' field of research and with their constant preoccupations in approaching new ways of teaching business English and in designing new methods of teaching collocations to business students. Popescu (2011) emphasized the importance of applying the best teaching strategy in the process of teaching business language: "Teachers of business English have been constantly preoccupied by their endeavours to find the best methods to teach their students how to use business language correctly and appropriately. However, practitioners have always endeavoured to find the best classroom methodology in order to equip business students with effective communication strategies" (p.19).

3. Results and discussion

Our experiment had multi-purpose implications: linguistic - in that contrastive linguistics analysis is conducted, lexicographic - as the results of the research, namely the inventory of collocations can be used as the basis for creating a dictionary, and pedagogic with focus on students - in that it aimed at raising students' awareness in using and identifying collocations, as well as with focus on teachers – in that it aimed at improving their approach of teaching collocations to business students. Our main purpose was a pedagogic one and we started from the assumption that foreign language students encounter difficulties in identifying the idiomatic use of a foreign language, in identifying possible relations of contiguity between words, hence students' difficulty in using collocations, be they business or general English ones. These types of difficulties arise in producing language, when

students use collocations which are not appropriate for the business context, or when they associate lexical units which do not usually collocate. This experimental activity was designed to help students identify such collocational patterning in both English and Romanian and observe the difference in use. The methods applied by us (corpus-based work) and the tools (concordancing software) were very valuable and helped students discover and better understand the treatment of certain collocations in Romanian and English. We believe this approach responds to the needs of learners for specific purposes as it entails a description of language. Based on students' findings, the teacher is better equipped to explain the process of collocation, to organise teaching material and to make teaching/learning more efficient. We rely on Kennedy's theory (1988) who in referring to the corpus-based approach to learning emphasizes the fact that language teaching theories have shifted from the traditional focus on the forms of language to the process of learning through communication: "The reasons for this pedagogical focus on communication have included a recognition that many learners in the latter part of the century need to learn second language for purposes of spoken interaction and not only as a way of accessing knowledge or cultural experiences from written sources" (Kennedy, 1998, 281). These changes also entail new ways of perceiving the teacher as organiser and supervisor of tasks and not as a traditional instructor, as well as new ways of approaching the content of teaching and of designing teaching material. A series of lexical exercises can be designed based on the principle of lexical co-occurrence collocating:

e.g. compound nouns (in our examples *business* - characterised by its immediacy in collocating with other nouns/verbs and *market*) – in which students have to identify pre- and post- determiners of the node. The two exercises below are based on students' findings.

Table 1. Self-designed lexical exercise 1

Pre-determiner	Noun (node)	Post-determiner
manufacturing	Business	Opportunities
Media		Manager
.....		Confidence
.....	
.....	
.....	
.....	

Table 2. Self-designed lexical exercise 2

Pre-determiner	Noun (node)	Post-determiner
Bear	Market	player
Bull		actor
.....		force
.....	
.....	
.....	
.....	

Corpora provide students with the beneficial opportunity of getting in touch with authentic, genuine material, in our case collocations and not just selecting them from prefabricated texts: "The recurrent and pervasive phrasal regularities in English, often consisting of prefabricated word sequences, suggest that an important task for language learners is to internalize such sequences. Collocations, where grammar and lexis meet in the phrase, are now taken seriously in language pedagogy because they can be identified empirically by the methodologies developed in corpus analysis." (Kennedy, 1998, 89)

Although all students had to work with the same headwords within business press genre, their interpretations and explanations differed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Some of them conducted surface analysis and interpretation, while some others in-depth research, some of them identified set phrases, some others idioms, others even interpreted the metaphorical (over)load of each word/ phrase/ idiom identified in their corpora, some others went even further and identified corresponding cognitive and conceptual categories. The latter category of students analysed and applied cognitive linguistic theories, identified conceptual metaphors in English and Romanian and compared the differences and similarities that arise between the two languages. In interpreting the results they discovered that not only do collocations identified in English texts outnumber the ones identified in Romanian articles, but also English collocations are characterised by a greater variety. In many cases students underlined the positive overtone resounding from English press articles versus the negative implications from Romanian articles. Among the terms identified in negative contexts and with negative connotations there were *crisis* and *inflation*, some words were identified both with negative and with positive connotations: *money* and collocations with *money* implied both negative and positive perspectives, depending on the context. These findings and the descriptive analysis of the business English genre led students to the conclusions that the Romanian journalese is characterized by economy of speech, stereotypes and lack of vividness in the use of language. In comparing figures of speech shaping journalistic discourse, the results identified the presence of metaphors in newspaper articles and of personification in Romanian ones. The successful results of students' research entitle us to rely on the validity of the pedagogic methods applied.

Our experiment was also fraught with difficulty, as either no/few collocations were identified in several cases, or the students had difficulties in establishing lexical relations between the English headword and collocations and its/their Romanian equivalent(s). Students' capacity to identify the assigned words in collocations in both English and Romanian business settings, and furthermore their ability to tackle the figurative layer of language prove their developed linguistic competences. At the end of this experiment students were empowered with competences in linguistic analysis, with the capacity of juggling with the figurative expressive layers of English and Romanian, with the capacity of making a descriptive research on a foreign language, i.e. discovering the resourcefulness of a foreign language, words' immediate capacity to collocate within a business (English) text, and not the least with the capacity of easily identifying Romanian equivalents for certain business English collocations. Starting from the assumption shared by many linguists that foreign language learners are sometimes tempted to (mis)transfer semantic collocations from target language to their mother tongue: "Learners of second languages sometimes transfer semantic collocations for the first language inappropriately to the second." (Kennedy, 1998, 289) we may state that our experiment was also useful translation practice for students. This translation exercise can be done by students on their own without being guided by the teacher, i.e. identifying equivalents for business English collocations in their mother tongue.

4. Conclusions

Among other benefits for students worth mentioning here there is the fact that students interacted with authentic business English texts. We may state that it was a multi-layered exercise for students, in which not only did they improve their knowledge of collocations and collocational patterning, but also they acquired in-depth knowledge of cognitive linguistic theory. For some students this experiment was a starting point for approaching a cognitive linguistic analysis on conceptual categories, especially for those who have the right knowledge and instruments to further conduct a higher level linguistic investigation resorting to corpus-based analysis. It is also an interesting experiment for the teacher as, after evaluating students' findings and their interpretation of linguistic data the teacher may decide on the validity of corpus-based research in teaching a foreign language. The texts collected and students' findings can be used by teachers as a basis for generalization and specialization in teaching business English collocations.

Students' findings, as well as the experiment in itself, highlight the usefulness of the corpus-based approach and techniques in conducting proper and accurate research, in analysing a wide range of linguistic characteristics, in

addressing a large array of research investigations. The paper emphasises the cross-disciplinary character of corpus analysis. As it was a valuable input for our MA students we strongly advocate corpus-based linguistic analysis which, in our opinion, gains ever increasing ground and validity as it implies manifold pedagogical benefits. Mention should also be made of the following gains: students interpret and analyse business language, they are empowered with skills to conduct linguistic analysis, a series of lexical analyses can be designed by the teacher and be successfully used in the business English class. All of these will raise EFL students' awareness of intercultural aspects of collocational patterning and will help them increase their competence in both mother tongue and target language.

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